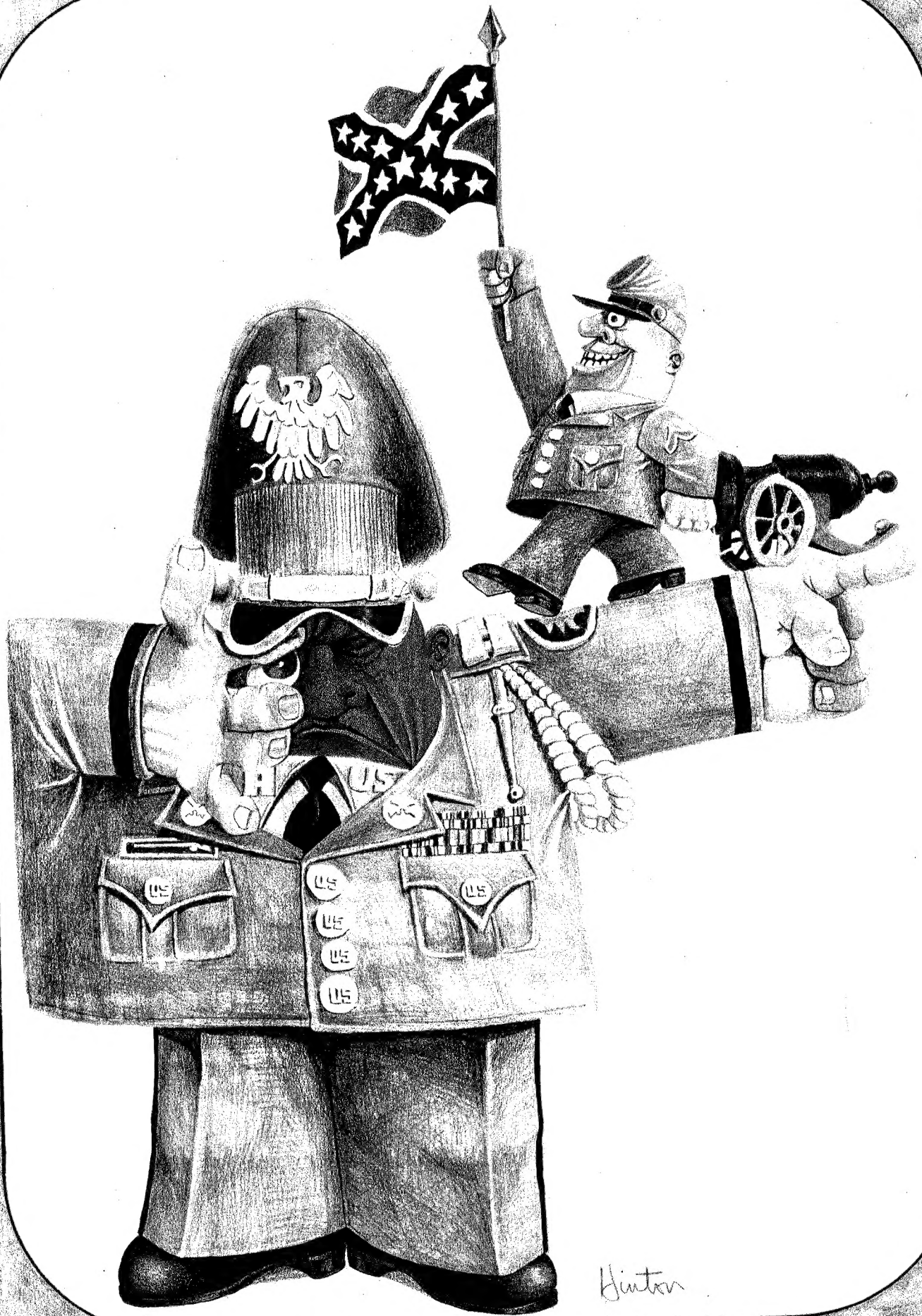


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It took a rookie from the Deep South to scramble the entire battalion

McCoy's Private Feud

by JACK RITCHIE

SATURDAY'S BARRACKS inspection went just fine until we got to Private McCoy's cot.

Captain Turner's eyes narrowed ominously. "Private, what's that on the wall behind you?"

McCoy remained at a rigid attention. "A picture of my girl, sir."

"Not that," Turner snapped. "I mean the Confederate flag."

"Yes, sir," Private McCoy said. "That's a Confederate flag."

I rested the clipboard on my arm and wrote down McCoy's name. Confederate flags used to mean two days KP. But now the captain had worked himself up to four. There was no doubt about it. Inflation had set in.

The captain turned to me. "Sergeant, how long has this man been in the company?"

"Two days, sir. He just finished basic at Benning." But I knew that wouldn't be an acceptable excuse in the captain's book. I put a four behind McCoy's name.

The captain lifted the tray of McCoy's foot locker. He glared and pointed. "What's that?"

McCoy swallowed. "I believe that's my underwear, sir."

The captain's face turned a darker red. "I don't mean your underwear. I mean that Confederate cap."

"Yes, sir," McCoy agreed. "That's a Confederate cap."

I erased the four and put down a five.

The captain scowled at the men standing at attention beside their cots. Finally he said, "Sergeant Randall, I want a company formation in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir."

He stalked toward the door. "And take down that flag."

I let the door slam behind him and then turned to the platoon sergeant.

"Wilson, how come you slipped up? I told you to warn any new man shipped into this platoon about the captain's bug."

Wilson shrugged. "I didn't see it. The kid must of put up the flag the last minute."

McCoy looked puzzled. "What's the captain so het up about?"

"The color gray," I said. "It makes him see red, white and blue."

In the orderly room, I handed my clipboard to Corporal Adams, our company clerk. "Make a list for the bulletin board."

Captain Turner came out of his office with a fresh cigar. "It's about time some people realize who won the war."

"Yes, sir," I said.

THE CAPTAIN is a short, heavy man who collected a couple of medals in Korea. He's done a lot of traveling since, but none of it ever knocked the Maine out of him or changed his nasal twang. If somebody invented lobster ice cream, he'd be the first to try it.

He puffed the cigar into life. "I had four great grandfathers in uniform."

I glanced at some papers on my desk. "Which side, sir?"

When I looked up, the captain was eyeing me suspiciously. "What part of the country do you come from sergeant?"

"Missouri, sir, I had kin on both sides."

Corporal Adams stopped typing. "Five days for McCoy?"

I nodded. My eyes went back to the papers. "Captain, did you know that the New England states once considered seceding from the Union?"

Corporal Adams was interested. "Did they make it?"

The captain glowered. "Adams, add your name to the list. Two days KP."

Adams looked shocked. "But sir, I'm the only one who knows how to make out the morning report."

I glanced at my watch, "I guess it's time for the formation, sir."

Outside I blew my whistle and the company double-timed out of the barracks. I waited for the report, then about-faced and saluted the captain. "All present and accounted for, sir."

The captain regarded the formation belligerently. "Private McCoy, front and center."

McCoy sharp-cornered his way out of the ranks.

Turner smiled, but it was a shark's smile. "Private, I assume that you know the Pledge of Allegiance?"

McCoy blinked. "Of course, sir."

The captain rubbed his hands. "Fine. Let's hear it."

Private McCoy recited the pledge. "Perfect," Turner said suavely.

"That was just perfect. Now face the company and do it one hundred and ninety-nine times more."

McCoy's mouth dropped. "But isn't once enough, sir?"

"Not in your case," the captain bellowed. "Evidently you never heard of Appomattox."

"Yes, sir," McCoy said. "My daddy referred to it now and then when the womenfolk weren't present."

The captain's fingers worked convulsively. "About face and start reciting. That's an order."

"Yes, sir," McCoy said miserably.

It took him approximately seventeen minutes to finish.

After I dismissed the company, the captain put his hand behind his back and a satisfied smile covered his face. "I guess I made my point."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I waited until he turned the corner before I went into the fourth platoon

—turn the page

barracks.

McCoy sat on his cot, his face still flaming with embarrassment. "The captain shouldn't of done that."

I clicked my tongue. "Your little old dignity got bruised?"

He sputtered. "I'm not going to forget this. I'm a McCoy, and you know what happened to the Hatfields when they crossed my kin in Kentucky."

"If I remember right, the Hatfields got the best of that particular feud." I studied him. "Don't eat your heart out. You can't do anything about it. You're just a rear-rank private and the captain's got the whole army behind him." But I thought I saw the light of an idea suddenly gleam in his eyes. He smiled to himself.

"Get into your fatigues," I snapped. "And report to the mess sergeant."

I finished a few things in the orderly room and then took the post bus to my place on Sergeant's row.

"How did the inspection go?" my wife Eilene asked.

"About average."

Grant Jackson Randall, my ten-year-old son, stopped repairing his bicycle in the yard and came into the house.

I studied his Confederate States of America belt buckle. "Boy, just to make your father happy, why don't you wear another belt for a couple of days?"

ON MONDAY, while the company practiced with dummy grenades on the parade grounds, I walked back to the orderly room to see whether Private Schmidt's emergency furlough had come through.

McCoy, in fatigues, leaned on the wooden rail in front of my desk. "Sergeant, I don't mind reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. I'm a loyal American and all that. But I don't think the pledge should be used as a punishment. It's down right sacrilegious."

"Straighten up," I said.

He straightened. "And another thing, sarge. According to Army Regulations, KP isn't suppose to be used as a punishment, either. It's actually supposed to be a sort of honor."

"Be joyful. You're being honored."

He sighed. "Well, the real reason I came in here was because I wanted your permission to go to the post library. I've got to make a list."

I glanced at the clock. Our KP's usually get an hour break in the afternoon. "If it's all right with the mess sergeant, it's all right with me."

He nodded and stretched. "Man, I'm bushed."

I looked up. "What do you want? A three day pass to celebrate Jeff

Davis's birthday?"

He brightened. "Come to think of it, sarge, it is coming up soon and —"

I got to my feet and he left in a hurry.

On Tuesday, Corporal Adams was off KP and back in the orderly room. He'd just finished emptying the company mailbox when Captain Turner came in.

The captain glanced at the large pile of letters on the table. "Well, looks like the men have been doing a lot of writing."

"Yes, sir," Adams said. "Especially Private McCoy."

The captain paused half-way into his office. "Oh? I suppose he has a lot of relatives?"

Corporal Adam's face was bland. "If he has, sir, all of them must be senators."

Turner came back to the table. "Senators?"

"Yes, sir. Southern senators."

Turner picked up one of the envelopes. "Senator Smathers, of Florida." The captain cleared his throat uneasily. "You don't suppose McCoy's complained about —"

Adams frowned slightly. "Sir, you are not allowed to censor the mail except during time of war and even then not within the continental United States."

Captain Turner colored. "I had no intention of censoring private McCoy's mail." He hesitated a moment and then picked up another envelope. "Sparkman of Alabama."

Adams resumed stuffing the mail into the pouch. He examined one of the envelopes. "Here's one addressed to Thurmond of South Carolina. The flap seems a little loose."

"No," the captain said firmly. "I'm a West Pointer and an officer. Corporal, seal that envelope immediately with scotch tape." Turner stalked into his office.

"Adams, get that mail down to the post office," I ordered.

At the door, Adams turned. "Sarge, you have no idea how I hate KP."

I studied his smile. "What state do you call home?"

"Louisiana." He left whistling *Dixie*.

When I got home for supper, I found my wife waiting tight-lipped. She indicated my son's new black eye.

"We fought the battle of Gettysburg again," my son said proudly. "Only this time we won."

Eilene folded her arms. "I think that Private McCoy is responsible for this. Everybody on the post is taking sides."

I examined my son's eyes. "Boy," I said sternly. "You shouldn't be fighting."

"Why do you always call him boy?" my wife asked. "His name is Grant. You got something against Grant?"

"Everybody at school calls me Jackson now," my son said. "I like it. It rings."

WHEN CAPTAIN Turner came into the orderly room Wednesday morning, he paled slightly at the stack of mail Corporal Adams had piled on the table.

Adams had the innocent expression of an angel on his face. "McCoy's writing to the House of Representatives now, sir. Up to the G's, I believe."

At ten o'clock, the captain's phone rang. He picked it up and straightened a bit as he listened. "Yes, sir," he finally said, and then he explained his side of the Case of Private McCoy.

When he hung up, he sighed thoughtfully. "An army post is just like a small town. That was Major Stevens."

"Yes, sir."

"Major Stevens said he'd back me up if anything happens because of this. He granted that perhaps the measure I took was necessary to maintain discipline." Turner frowned. "But still, I had the feeling that he didn't entirely —" He shrugged. "Why does Major Stevens always say discipline? It's discipline, not discipline."

"He's from Virginia, sir."

The captain got up and stared moodily out of the window. "My grandfather was a general. My father is a general."

He turned around. "The army is fair and just in its promotions. I'll make colonel some day."

"Yes, sir."

"But after that, all promotions go up before Congress." He walked back and forth. "If one senator—if a group of senators take it into their heads to —"

The phone rang again and he picked it up. He came to attention as he listened. "Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

He put down the phone. "Colonel Mason wants to see us."

Colonel Mason had aristocratic features and touches of gray at his temples. "I want to hear the whole story, captain. From the beginning."

When Captain Turner finished, the colonel looked at me.

"Do you approve of the captain's actions?"

"Sir, I'd just as soon forget the whole thing."

He sighed. "So would I. But I understand that Private McCoy's been writing letters. To influential people." He pulled himself together. "Captain Turner, as your commanding officer, I will back you to the limit. No matter

where the ax falls."

Turner looked relieved. "Thank you, sir. I thought it was about time we taught those Johnny Rebs just who won —" He stopped abruptly as his eyes focused on the portrait of Robert E. Lee on the wall behind the colonel.

Colonel Mason absently fingered his V.M.I. ring. "My father was a general. His father was a general. And his father was a general."

"Yes, sir," Turner said. "That would have been during the Civil War."

The colonel looked up coldly. "The War Between the States."

"Yes, sir," Turner said quickly.

The colonel shook his head sadly. "My name is on the new promotion list. It's up before Congress now."

"I'm sorry, sir," Turner said. He flushed. "I mean congratulations."

Colonel Mason sighed. "But I'll never make general now. Not after this."

Outside, Captain Turner got wearily into the jeep. "I'm surrounded by them. Everywhere I turn, there's another one." At the corner of L and Beauregard, he touched my arm. "Where's McCoy now?"

"He'd be in the mess hall, sir."

We found McCoy on his hands and knees scrubbing the mess hall floor. He came to attention.

"At ease," the captain snapped. He scowled. "You got any complaints about the army?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, sir."

The captain put his face closer to McCoy's. "Like about what happened last Saturday?"

McCoy thought it over. "No, sir."

Turner walked around him. "How do you like the army?"

"I was drafted, sir."

The captain glowered. "In the army we do things the army way. If you got any complaints, you go through channels."

"Yes, sir."

"First you tell the corporal, and he tells the platoon sergeant, and the platoon sergeant tells the first sergeant, and the first sergeant comes to me."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The captain's face got deep red. "Then why the devil did you write those —" He seemed to choke and was unable to go on.

I took out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to McCoy.

He examined it suspiciously.

I lit it for him. "What's your first name?"

"Bernard."

I smiled. "Barney, some of us like the army and some of us don't."

He nodded. "I noticed that, sarge."

"Barney," I said again. "The army has to have discipline — I mean, discipline. If there's something you don't

like you can't just up and — well write to your congressman."

McCoy seemed fascinated with a smoke ring he had blown.

I resisted the impulse to wring his neck. "Barney, in *anything*, not just the army, you got to follow the rules." I patted his shoulder. "Now, for instance, what do you intend to do with your life?"

His eyes brightened. "I'm going into politics."

Somehow that figured.

It was quiet for about a full minute. I had the feeling that McCoy was in complete command of the situation.

I also had the feeling that now, suddenly, he was forgiving us for something.

He blew another smoke ring. "Yes, sir. Politics. And so I decided to get all the information I needed straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, about how to campaign and get elected and so forth you know. And I wrote to all the senators and congressmen." He amended that. "All the southern senators and southern congressmen. Southern politics is a trade in itself."

The captain made noises with his mouth before he could find the words. "You mean to say that that's *all* you've been writing to those congressmen about?"

McCoy's face was childlike with surprise. "All, sir? Why, of course, sir."

Turner took a deep breath. "McCoy, I don't know whether to give you another five days of KP or promote you to PFC."

McCoy smiled. "My folks would sure be proud of me if I was a PFC, sir."

Outside the mess hall the captain took another deep breath, and looked at the sky. "How long has Private McCoy been on KP?"

"This is his fifth day, sir."

He nodded. "Give him the rest of the day off. I think he's learned his lesson." He became thoughtful. "You know sergeant, maybe I've been a little harsh about those flags."

I said nothing.

"Now mind you, sergeant, I'm commanding this company and I don't want to see any Confederate flags." He cleared his throat. "For the present, at least."

Yes, sir."

The captain got into the jeep. "You know, sergeant, that boy's just liable to be in the senate when my name comes up."

I remembered the grin I'd seen on Private McCoy's face just before I closed the mess hall door.

"Yes, sir. I wouldn't be at all surprised."



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